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ABSTRACT

An interpretive and ethnographic approach to human communication study, using naturalistic or participant observer techniques, is particularly useful in intercultural contexts. The basic ideas undergirding this approach are (1) that the researcher is the instrument of inquiry, (2) that humane considerations are more important than investigating issues, and (3) that a hypothetical study design is especially compatible with ethnographic research. The challenge for the researcher is to avoid conscious interference as much as possible, and consistently to be wary of imputing motive and/or internal state to another, solely on the basis of perceived behavior. The researcher must be constantly concerned with context, conscientiously detailing the circumstances being studied. In addition, the quality of evidence generated while in the field depends on the nature of the relationships established with the people who comprise the communication setting being investigated. Rapport is essential, but too much rapport can be as detrimental as too little, and can distort reported observations. People being observed should not be treated impersonally, and their integrity as individuals must be honored. A priority of the ahypothetical research technique is reportorial description (in narrative style) and qualitative analysis or interpretation. (A series of ethnographic vignettes from a Taoist commune in Colorado is included, as well as explanatory commentary illustrating the ethnographic/interpretive method.) (NKA)

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION STUDY:
A DESCRIPTION OF AN INTERPRETIVE/ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION STUDY:
A DESCRIPTION OF AN INTERPRETIVE/ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

Lyall Crawford

Three basic ideas, in conjunction with an assumption of the interpretive paradigm and commonly practiced techniques of qualitative research, constitute a style of inquiry that is useful for the study of human/intercultural communication phenomena. This style, called interpretive/ethnographic, is described and discussed in this essay and then illustrated with narrative vignettes of field research incidents.

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Key Concepts: Interpretive Paradigm, Qualitative Research, Intercultural Communication, Ethnography, Ahypothetical/Naturalistic Study Design, Hermeneutic Method, Researcher as Instrument of Inquiry, Humanistic Attitude, American Taoist Commune.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION STUDY:

A DESCRIPTION OF AN INTERPRETIVE/ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

This essay describes an interpretive and ethnographic approach to human communication study that is particularly useful in intercultural contexts. It is derived from common knowledge in our discipline and it implies what are usually called naturalistic or participant observer techniques. One fundamental presupposition and two closely associated principles constitute the interpretive/ethnographic approach described in this essay.

Fundamental Presupposition: The researcher is the instrument of inquiry.

Principle 1: Humane considerations are more important than investigative issues.

Principle 2: Ahypothetical study design is especially compatible with ethnographic research.

The fundamental presupposition and the two principles give a particular shape to the interpretive/ethnographic approach discussed here; they imply certain assumptions about what constitutes interpretive inquiry. For instance, one of these assumptions is the seemingly natural relationship between interpretive/ethnographic inquiry and qualitative research methods. Stella Ting-Toomey (1984) points out that "(q)ualitative research... shares the metatheoretical assumptions of the interpretive paradigm" (p. 169) and the "interpretive paradigm," she writes, "is based upon the assumption that social reality is created and sustained through the subjective and intersubjective experience of the actors in the scene" (p. 170). She then makes three observations deduced from the interpretive paradigm.

First, qualitative research is the study of symbolic discourse that constitutes the multiple realities for the involved actors in the social scene. Discourse here, refers to both the study of "texts" (monologue forms such as narratives and speeches) and "conversations" (dialogue forms in face-to-face or mediated interactions). Second, qualitative research is the study of the interpretive principles that social actors used to cognitively "make sense" of the meanings that

are attached to their symbolic activities. Interpretive principles, here, denote two processes. The first process is concerned with the processing and comprehension of the discourse from the participants' viewpoint. The second process is concerned with the strategic choices of the participants in selecting the symbolic codes for presentation, given the prior discourse context. Third, qualitative research is the study of the contextual principles that situationally govern and guide the interpretation of discourse in a speech community. Contextual principles may include the roles and relationships of the participants, the presence of onlookers, and the physical setting, to a set of relevant situational events within which the discourse is functioning.

In short, the task of the interpretive social theorist is to "interpret these interpretations so that we may better understand the meanings people used to guide activities." (Christians & Carey, 1981). The qualitative mode of inquiry, which includes different qualitative research techniques such as participant observation, naturalistic field study, textual analysis, and metaphor analysis, is primarily interested in eliciting the "insider's meanings" of a social situation from the stance of a participant-observer. (pp. 170-171)

Ting-Toomey's (1984) remarks about the interpretive paradigm and qualitative research are clearly compatible with the idea that the researcher is the instrument of inquiry, the importance of a humanistic attitude, and the usefulness of ahypothetical study design as they pertain to the investigation of human/intercultural communication phenomena. The interpretive/ethnographic approach presented here is concerned with providing credible and convincing interpretation of human/intercultural communication occurrences through the use of "a hermeneutic method, wherein one interpretation is piled on top of another, one version of a text (or action treated as text) is compared with another, one set of perceptions is set against another" (Dolgin, Kemnitzer & Schneider, 1977, p. 480; Geertz, 1977). In this essay, interpretive/ethnographic inquiry refers to a mode of research that characteristically uses a hermeneutic perspective to describe and interpret contemporary human/intercultural communication episodes in naturally occurring situations as unobtrusively as possible. Detailed description is essential and interpretation often consists of the identification and explanation of themes

contained in the research materials. The three basic ideas (i.e., fundamental presupposition and two principles) undergirding the interpretive/ethnographic approach presented here may now be considered more thoroughly.

Researcher as the Instrument of Inquiry

It is vitally important that the researcher keep in mind, by realizing the selectivity and idiosyncrasies of personal perceptions, the intimate connection between one's self and what one "sees." The researcher must responsibly work out and realistically assess the relationship between one's role as an observer and the phenomena observed. The interpretive researcher strives, while maintaining a proper measure of spontaneity and reserve, to be acutely sensitive to the influences which shape impressions and make them individually and uniquely experienced. An attempt is made, for example, to cultivate an awareness of the discernible characteristics of one's physiology and the predispositions of one's psyche.

Gregory Bateson (1979) sketches the limits of this self-examination. In a discussion of the term "consciousness," he notes:

I prefer to use that word, not as a general term, but specifically for that strange experience whereby we (and perhaps other mammals) are sometimes conscious of the products of our perception and thought but unconscious of the greater part of the processes. (footnote, p. 87)

As Bateson (1979) suggests, although the processes of perception itself are not cognitively accessible, the link between these processes and their outcome (i.e., perceptions) is inescapable. What the researcher must do, then, is acknowledge this connection; that is, say in effect: "I accept this information given me in the form of my perceptions even though I cannot directly know the manner in which this information is processed and organized," and be consistently mindful of this whenever perceptions are

translated into the research materials derived from a particular communication context because it constrains what otherwise might be taken as an objective analysis of certain communication phenomena. W. Barnett Pearce (1977) underscores this point when he writes:

Psychological studies of perceptions and philosophical analysis of theoretical statements converge on the conclusion that the knower is inextricably part of what is known. Summarizing a classic series of studies of social perception, Ittelson and Cantril [1954] stated that "the world as we experience it is the product of perception, not the cause of it" [p. 5]. In philosophy, Hanson [1958] has demonstrated that observation is "theory-laden": what an observer knows or believes -- his "theory," no matter how inarticulate -- structures what he sees. (pp. 51-52)

Others write in a similar vein. For instance, William James (Allen, 1967) believed:

A philosophy is the expression of a man's intimate character, and all definitions of the universe are but the deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon it....If we take the whole history of philosophy, the systems reduce themselves to a few main types which, under all the technical verbiage in which the ingenious intellect of man envelopes them, are just so many visions, modes of feeling the whole push, and seeing the whole drift of life, forced on one by one's total character and experience, and on the whole preferred -- there is no other truthful word -- as one's best working attitude. (p. ix)

And Bateson (1979) asserts: "But epistemology is always and inevitably personal. The point of the probe is always in the heart of the explorer..." The theme of these quotations, of course, is the seemingly simple and obvious realization that "the knower is inextricably part of what is known" (cf. Dewey and Bentley, 1949). How we take ourselves and how we take our world is a function of who we are, and our perceptions and interpretations arising from our experiences are mediated and shaped by our sensory apparatus, the processes of which are essentially unfathomable because they are out of our awareness.

The challenge, then, is to interfere consciously as little as possible. Glenn Jacobs (1970), in the preface to his anthology The Participant Observer, considers this issue. He writes about "not interposing anything between ourselves and the objects of our inquiry," and he puts the case as follows:

We interpret the hallmark of science, empiricism, literally; that is, we take it to mean what some writers call surrender of the self to the phenomenal world so that our experience of it is circumscribed as little as possible. I am not suggesting that we cast out the standard scientific criteria of relevance, internal consistency, replicability, objectivity, and so on. I mean simply that these should not be idolatrized, for they are merely tools ancillary to ourselves as research instruments [emphasis mine]. To the extent that we cannot escape participating in the experience of those we observe, we must always more or less be participant observers. (pp. viii-ix)

It must be kept firmly in mind, however, that "[a]lthough the scientist can thus acquire directly some sense of the subjective states of the participants, this sense remains his own and cannot merely be assumed to correspond to that of others" (McCall & Simmons, 1969, p. 5). So, whatever the details and given strategies of investigation, the participant observer cannot realistically dismiss that our perceptions (i.e., the interpretation of sensory stimuli) are subject to the conditions of our embodiment.

The researcher who realizes this must also acknowledge personal projections onto the social setting/communication context under scrutiny. "[I]t is certainly a part of our consciousness," writes Julian Jaynes (1976), "to 'see' into the consciousness of others, to identify with our friends and families so as to imagine what they are thinking and feeling" (p. 5). The importance of intersubjectivity is undeniable, but the investigator must consistently be wary of imputing motive and/or internal state to another solely on the basis of perceived behavior. Too much identification with the participants renders one especially prone to attributing more, in terms of

interpretation and explanation, than is warranted and makes prudent the use of multiple sources of information (e.g., informants, interviewing, and document analysis). Cognizance of the researcher as the instrument of inquiry forces us to recognize that we are at least once removed from immediate experience and direct knowledge; that we are denied, by the conditions of our existence, unencumbered insight and total understanding of the world in which we live.

Consequently, it is important that the assumptions that underlie the reported evidence and interpretations of our observations be identified and communicated. What this means is that the interpretive researcher becomes perennially concerned with context. In addition to continuously monitoring his or her own predispositions while conducting research (i.e., regularly asking: "What is my part in these occurrences?"), it is necessary to conscientiously detail the circumstances being studied. The materials and reported findings of naturalistic inquiry must be carefully placed in context. For the interpretive researcher engaged in the research of human communication, this crucial importance of context leads to the frequent use of probabilistic statements whenever an attempt is made to generalize from uniquely occurring situations.

Preeminence of Humane Considerations

Obviously, the quality of evidence generated by an interpretive researcher while in the field depends on the nature of the relationships established with the people who comprise the communication setting being investigated. Rapport is essential. Representative descriptions and insightful interpretations are not possible without it. But too much rapport — to the point of intimacy, perhaps — can be as detrimental as too little. Both extremes influence what the researcher experiences in a manner that may compromise personal impressions and distort reported observations. There are

no hard-and-fast rules for determining exactly how much empathy (i.e., to what extent one identifies with participants) and how much reserve (i.e., to what extent one keeps an "analytic eye") the researcher is to integrate as observer and interpreter. The researcher's experience and skill, in conjunction with the particular context being investigated, is the final arbiter of this issue.

There is, however, a simple attitude that is integral to the interpretive approach discussed here; namely, that the people one seeks to understand are not to be treated impersonally, that their integrity as individuals be honored, and that humane considerations are always to have precedence over the intents of any research enterprise. (See Bowers & Courtright, 1984, pp. 295-299 for another expression of the humane point of view with regard to human communication inquiry.) Theodore Roszak (1969) concurs with this attitude. He is critical of impersonal inquiry and the privileged position it gives to the investigator:

As soon as two human beings relate in detachment as observer and observed, as soon as the observer claims to be aware of nothing more than the behavioral surface of the observed, an invidious hierarchy is established which reduces the observed to a lower status. (p. 222)

Roszak (1969) deplores the "gross impertinence" of "detached observation" and the assumption that the researcher has the right to reduce a person to an "integer" in the name of science. The clear implication is that researchers strive to appreciate the world of others experientially as well as intellectually, that responsible inquiry requires more than detached observation. This is a difficult task if the persons who populate communication contexts of interest are made into "things," if they are objectified and manipulated. Consequently, to investigate and learn about others it is recommended that the researcher somehow participate in their lives and be what Geertz (1973) calls a "sensitive observer." Properly done,

research of this kind may yield narrative accounts rich with description and interpretation.

Ahypothetical/Naturalistic Study Design

The manipulation of variables receives little, if any, attention from the participant observer/interpretive researcher. Even though hypotheses may be proposed and/or tested, and systematic and repeated observation is important, a priority of this research technique is reportorial description and qualitative analysis or interpretation (cf. Pearce, 1977 and Philipsen, 1977).

For instance, it is typically more important to concentrate on patterns of interaction in an effort to identify the dynamics of relationships and reach some knowledge with regard to what is unique about the communicating taking place. Too many preconceived ideas acted on in the setting can impede the researcher's ability to experience the world-at-hand in a manner as similar as possible to those he or she seeks to understand, bearing in mind, or course, that interpretive inquiry is not bound to this particular ideology. The primary effort is to view the entire milieu, the whole context of interest, as comprehensively and integratively as circumstances allow. William Sims Bainbridge (1978), referring to the traditions of the sociology of religion, writes: "I happen to believe that it is most fruitful to step back ...and look at the phenomena afresh simply as social phenomena to be interpreted and explained in terms of very general principles" (p. 10). This idea is consonant with the interpretive perspective outlined here. General or global approaches are legitimate research protocols for human communication study. It is important that there be a cadre of investigators who provide wide-ranging and principally descriptive accounts of human communication phenomena. Formal propositions, in most cases, are not stated and tested. Instead, interpretive remarks pertaining to particular communication events

are given in narrative form. Without accounts of this nature it is impossible for there to be deeper interpretation and comparative cross-cultural analysis.

Illustration

We're all under the same sky and walk the same earth;
we're alive together during the same moment.

Maxine Hong-Kingston

At this point, I'd like to change the voice of this essay by introducing some ethnographic vignettes taken from my research of a Taoist commune in Colorado. The focus of these narratives is Tao-jen (pronounced Dao-ren), the Chinese man who directed the commune. These excerpts are arranged chronologically and the names are pseudonyms. The historical present tense is used. They are included here to illustrate the kinds of description and commentary that follow from the assumptions of the interpretive/ethnographic approach to the study of human/intercultural communication discussed in this essay. Obviously, this material is not intended to be definitive. Instead, it is meant to suggest a style of investigation that relies on descriptive narrative and thematic interpretation. Consequently, it is not important that some of the excerpts may require more context to be satisfactorily understood or that the interpretive commentary embedded in the narratives is exceedingly brief because the purpose, once again, is to merely suggest a style of inquiry. These vignettes are also relevant because they concentrate on intercultural matters and provide insight into the nature of a contemporary American commune.

4 October 1977

"Ass kissing" as a mark of maturity is an early cultural reference in the fieldnotes. Tao-jen connects it to his upbringing in China by indicating it was a value of the family in which he was raised. He also intimates that he found it a difficult behavior to practice. Despite this, or possibly because of it, it is a way of evaluating others he appears to hold to during the period of observation. He uses "ass kissing" as a means of assessing maturity.

17 October

Tao-jen includes "taking shit" with "ass kissing" as a way of judging maturity. He cites the recollection of his father's outbursts in this regard which is reasonable to take as a model for his own confrontative behavior. Tao-jen's diatribes, then, may be seen, in part, as a method of testing the ability of others to take "shit" and thereby giving measure to their maturity.

7 December

As meditation ends, Tao-jen gives Mathew the printed material from a package of incense he had opened earlier when lighting a stick to begin our sitting together and instructs him to dispose of it. His brief explanation to Mathew is difficult to hear but apparently it is a Chinese custom to revere the written word and not discard it. This gesture may also be an aspect of the guru/disciple relationship.

15 December

On one of her trips in from the farm, Kristaline tells us how rich and full and very clear her dreams have been while sleeping in her tent there. (On 4 December Kristaline and Tom left the compound to camp on the farm for most of the month until summoned back by Tao-jen.) In one of them, for instance, she enters a room where Betty is and begins to take off her clothes because she is too warm. But suddenly she becomes aware of Betty's disapproval and she thinks to herself Oh! Oh! and leaves the room.

Kristaline's dream leads to a discussion, among those of us present for meditation, of how her behavior may sometimes be perceived as inappropriate by older people or persons of a different culture even though she means well and is unaware that she is being offensive. Tao-jen says, for example, that Kristaline would consider it a proper gesture to invite his mother to have tea that has been prepared over an open fire; she would think nothing, he says, of asking his mother to sit near the fire with no place to put the tea cup and so on, without realizing that this is actually an insult. After a moment, Tao-jen laughs and admits that he has been speaking about himself, not his mother. He goes on to say that while in the Alps doing t'ai chi camps he got tired of having his tea camping-out-style all the time. On the farm he wants to be able to have his tea inside.

Midmorning, 10:00 or 10:30, I walk into the kitchen to cut vegetables for lunch. Kristaline is sitting at the table sewing a pair of pants, naked from the waist down.

17 December

At one point during meditation, Tao-jen lays out several activities for Nadia who is visiting from Switzerland. He also mentions certain strategies she could use to lengthen the time she is permitted to remain in this country beyond what is allowed on a visitor's visa (e.g., contacting a faculty friend of his at a nearby university and seeing whether some kind of student status could be obtained through his academic position and connections). After uttering these remarks, Tao-jen says it is a Chinese custom to make arrangements for guests without consulting them.

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In the course of one of his verbal assaults on Nadia, Tao-jen berates a person they both know and a man with whom she had once been involved. Nadia reminds him of an instance when they were all together and of how reserved, polite and respectful he had been with this man then. Tao-jen replies that she knows nothing of Chinese culture because his acting in this manner meant he actually despised him.

7 January

According to Tao-jen, it is an "ego battle" that defines the conflict between him and Jason, even though Jason is unable to realize it. He tells us, during meditation, that Jason is trying to do right, that he is honest, but that he does not have a clear perception of the situation. Jason, he says, admits destroying (in a psychological sense) six or seven women, including one of his own sisters. Tao-jen also reports that Jason recognizes his need for a group within which he can relate for his own personal growth, implying the incongruity of his insistence to the contrary, the necessity of being on his own. Jason was looking for the "perfect guru" and he has been disillusioned, Tao-jen observes. Finally, Tao-jen traces the conflict between them and the resultant difficulties communicating to the differences in their respective cultures; he suggests that each of them are emulating the society of their upbringing, behaving in the ways they have been socialized to behave, by their fathers especially. Tao-jen concludes that a rational approach to circumstances such as these is not workable. The only thing to do is to "empty," he says.

18 January

A Korean man, in his 20s or 30s who has past connections with the Community, informs Tao-jen that his wife is now "devoted to him." This is an Oriental way, Tao-jen points out later when this man is no longer present, of conveying precisely the contrary; it is another instance when words or behavior actually mean their opposite. The Korean man's wife is probably still "fucking around" with another man, Tao-jen says.

27 January

The confusion created because of double-binds (e.g., Tao-jen saying: "Money doesn't matter" and "I have to make ends meet" almost concurrently) extends to his relationship with Kristaline. For instance, Tao-jen says: "I love you" and then, just a few minutes later, tells her she can "die in the gutter," that their relationship is purely a functional one. Subsequently referring to this incident, Tao-jen makes it evident that there is a cultural dimension which further complicates this double-bind and may actually engender it. In fact, he attributes a large portion of the difficulties in their relationship to the misunderstandings that occur because of cultural differences. To illustrate, he explains to me during a lunch time conversation that the words "I love you" carry different and incompatible meanings. When he uses these words he takes them in a functional and pragmatic sense. (Tao-jen does not elaborate what he means by "functional." Presumably, he is referring to certain aspects of living that a wife or a relationship can facilitate. From his perspective this probably means being taken care of in particular ways such as having his meals prepared or his body massaged.) Kristaline, on the other hand, interprets them more in line with the "American idea"; that is, "buddy buddy," "play baseball together," Tao-jen says.

28 January

Again, speaking about "love," Tao-jen reiterates the differences in culture that lead to conflicting interpretations of the concept and make this aspect of his relationship with Kristaline problematic. In meditation, continuing his functional approach, he reminds her he has offered to buy her things—a coat, for example. Todd screams in apparent frustration. Tao-jen is behaving, he says, like his father who had tried unsuccessfully to buy his affection. Kristaline inserts that whenever Tao-jen offers to purchase her something, her inclination is to say no. And Todd emphasizes that "love" is not expressed or experienced in a material fashion; it cannot be bought, he says.

12 February

Tao-jen's extreme displeasure with the manner in which I delivered his invitation to Maxine Hong-Kingston derives, in part, from cultural differences. The gestures he believes I should have made (e.g., inviting this woman writer to tea) are a matter of simple courtesy for him, while for me, at the time, they seemed presumptuous; I was acting more on my own behalf than as a representative of Tao-jen. Had I acted in this way, as I now think Tao-jen rightfully expected me to do, inviting her to tea would have seemed more natural and proper.

10 March

Tao-jen is sensitive to criticism. When he is told that a professor at the private college not far from the compound has said that his translation of the Chuang Tsu is not especially good, he becomes reactive and begins shouting abusive remarks about the professor to the visiting student who is the informant. Tao-jen defends his translation by saying that the language of the Chuang Tsu is particularly difficult and he ventures that there are probably no more than ten Chinese in the United States who are capable of translating it. To further support his argument, he says that Alan Watts has called his translation "laconic." (Actually, Watts applies this term to Tao-jen's translation of the Lao Tsu, not the Chuang Tsu). Then, lowering his voice, he wants to know how old this professor is and, when he is told that the man is 65, Tao-jen's manner softens considerably. He says the professor is too old to be bothered by his insults and he invites him to the commune, through the student, to discuss his translation of the Chuang Tsu, word by word. Learning more about the professor's credentials (e.g., that he worked for the CIA during the War as a translator), Tao-jen becomes respectful and comments that he probably knows his "area."

19 March

Tao-jen justifies hitting Greta on the basis of his cultural heritage. During t'ai chi he mentions a doctor friend in China whose fourth wife killed herself by jumping down a well, like the aunt in Woman Warrior (1975), because he had become angry with her. "That's my background!" Tao-jen shouts, directing the remark toward Greta.

Commentary

The vignettes cited here briefly illustrate the kind of evidence and interpretive narrative that may be used to provide a reading of a particular communication event. The task is to look at the public and accessible behavior or text.

Walter R. Fisher (1984, 1985) and Thomas M. Scheidel (1977) give us a reasonably unobtrusive way to approach the kind of evidence the vignettes illustrate. Fisher's "narrative paradigm" lets us think about the vignettes in terms of stories about Tao-jen. Scheidel's "levels of evidence" permits us to classify these stories according to how abstract they are. Both devices help us explore Tao-jen's influence in the commune and understand this particular subculture and speech community through narrative.

The theme of Fisher's two essays is the "humans are essentially storytellers" (1984, p. 7). His narrative paradigm is "a theory of human communication based on the conception of persons as homo narrans" (p. 1). According to Fisher (1985), our stories constitute social realities. Storytelling is a meaning-making device. We tell our tales and construct our lives. Conversation is ontological. Narration is a foundation for human experience. Fisher (1984) writes:

By "narration" I refer to a theory of symbolic actions -- words and/or deeds -- that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them. The narrative perspective, therefore, has relevance to real as well as fictive worlds, to stories of living and to stories of the imagination. (p. 2)

Tao-jen once referred to himself as a member of a "dying species." He was unquestionably a unique individual. Shaped by two cultures, he was the most dynamic and influential person in the commune. The stories about him revealed in the vignettes are inherently interesting and valuable. Fisher's (1984, 1985) homo narrans theme is one potential means for interpreting them.

Thomas M. Scheidel (1977) stresses the importance of acknowledging that "we seldom encounter the basic data (call it first level data) upon which scientific advance in communication theory is based" (p. 22). Because of this, we frequently accept into our own research perspectives assertions about human communication inquiry based upon the "authoritativeness of the person making a scientific claim, and upon the ease with which we can assimilate that claim (all of which we could call second level evidence)" (p. 22).

The vignettes used for illustrative purposes in this essay demonstrate different levels of evidence. Some statements are verbatim, taken from the transcripts of tape recorded conversations. Others are essentially descriptive accounts, set down during or shortly after the event. Still others are more novelistic, written to convey the drama of the place.

There are, of course, many other possible interpretive perspectives that may be used to "make sense" of the genre of evidence exemplified by the vignettes. The principal purpose of this essay is to describe an interpretive approach to human/intercultural communication inquiry, so it is not my intent to give a comprehensive reading of the vignettes. (See Crawford [1986] for a detailed application of the interpretive/ethnographic approach described in this essay.) All I am suggesting here is that two simple ideas (i.e., that "humans are essentially storytellers" [Fisher, 1984] and that the evidence of communication inquiry exists at different levels of abstraction [Scheidel, 1977]) may be used to initiate an interpretation of accounts about Tao-jen and commune culture.

Summary

It is apparent that the approach to human/intercultural communication study discussed and advocated in this essay closely associates certain terms. These terms are ethnographic accounts, qualitative research techniques,

interpretive analysis, hermeneutic method, and human/intercultural communication. No special vocabulary has been employed. Ethnography refers to the descriptive study of cultures (DeVito, 1986, p. 108). Qualitative/naturalistic research techniques refers to procedures typically employed in field studies such as participant observation, interviewing, and document analysis (McCall & Simmons, 1969). Interpretive analysis derives from "the assumption that social reality is created and sustained through the subjective and intersubjective experience of the actors in the scene" (Ting-Toomey, 1984, p. 170). Hermeneutic method is a process "wherein one interpretation is piled on top of another, one version of a text (or action treated as text) is compared with another, one set of perceptions is set against another" (Dolgin, Kemnitzer & Schneider, 1977, p. 480). And intercultural communication simply means "[c]ommunication between members of different cultures or subcultures" (DeVito, 1986, p. 162).

Earlier, it was stated that for the purposes of this discussion interpretive/ethnographic inquiry refers to a mode of research that characteristically uses a hermeneutic perspective to describe and interpret contemporary human/intercultural communication episodes in naturally occurring situations as unobtrusively as possible. This description of interpretive/ethnographic inquiry brings together the major themes of this essay. The connection between the key terms of this description may be expressed as follows: (a) human/intercultural communication phenomena may be fruitfully studied in uncontrived circumstances with minimal intervention; (b) qualitative research methods are generally unobtrusive and particularly useful for generating descriptive/ethnographic accounts; and (c) descriptive/ethnographic accounts are particularly amenable to interpretive/thematic/hermeneutic analysis.

In sum, human/intercultural communication study is a vast area of interest that may be productively explored through the interpretation of ethnographic accounts. The presupposition acknowledging the researcher as the instrument of inquiry is the fundamental premise of the interpretive perspective discussed in this essay. A humanistic attitude and ahypothetical study design are two important principles closely associated with this perspective. Together, these three basic ideas provide a useful research protocol for human/intercultural communication study.

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